

## Hidden Gems in John- Divinely Inspired and Humanly Written

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### Introduction

One of the great technological innovations of recent years is the GPS- Global Positioning System. The days of getting lost, we are told are over, thanks to GPS.

Maybe there are some of you here this morning who think that it would be great to have a Bible GPS- some sure way of not only finding your way around the Bible, so you don't get waylaid in Leviticus - but something to enable you to get to a good grasp of what the passage meant to God's people back then, understand its significance, so that you can navigate your way through life now, 'walking in the ways of the Lord'. No doubt this is one of the reasons why you are here at the Biblical Literacy Class, to help you to develop a *literate* reading of the Bible which is not the same as reading the Bible *literally*. A literate reading means you take into account the type of literature you are looking at (narrative, parable, apocalyptic and so on), the literary conventions of the time (use of hyperbole and symbolic numbers, especially in the Book of Revelation), how the passage would have been understood in the past so we can understand it aright in the present. As someone has said, 'The Bible was written *for* us and not *to* us.'<sup>1</sup>

With this approach in mind I want us to leap forward to the end of John's Gospel, what is referred to as the epilogue-Chapter 21- in order to discover some hidden gems which are meant to strengthen our confidence in the inspiration and reliability of Scripture as well as encourage us in our mission to the world.

### Dump da Vinci

Very early on in the life of the Christian movement it was bedevilled by heretical sects. One group such group was the Gnostics, whose name is derived from the Greek, 'gnosis' - 'knowledge', for these people claimed to have an insider knowledge of God denied ordinary rank and file believers. Not surprisingly they developed esoteric ways of reading the Bible which involved having special codes to discern the 'deeper', 'hidden' meaning of Scripture. They also concocted their own

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<sup>1</sup> See John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill, *Old Testament Today: A Journey from original meaning to Contemporary Significance* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2004).

'scriptures' such as the so-called 'Gospel of Philip'. In more recent years this kind of approach has made a pile of money for Dan Brown with his 'da Vinci code'.

However, just because there were crackpot ways of reading the Bible involving codes, symbols and the like, doesn't mean that there weren't widely recognised *legitimate ways* of writing which involved numbers and symbols designed to convey truths which were to be found elsewhere in the plain meaning of the Biblical text.

One such device common amongst the Jews and later Christians was that of *gematria*.

Let me explain.

When I was a young boy I was greatly influenced by 'the Man from UNCLE' show on TV. As aspiring Napoleon Solos, my friends and I used to send messages to each other in school by way of simple codes, for example, assigning A the number 1, the letter B, number 2 and so on-not exactly Enigma but that was about all we could manage! The Jews did something similar. Hebrew letters were also numbers: the first nine letters being 1-9, the next nine being 10-90, and the last five being 100-400. "Coding" words with numbers is called gematria. One of the most well-known examples is to be found at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel in his genealogy. It is generally recognised that his division into three generations of fourteen is artificially constructed to make an important point underscored in chapter 1 v17, 'Thus there were *fourteen* generations in all from Abraham to *David*, *fourteen* from *David* to the exile in Babylon and *fourteen* from the exile to the *Christ*.' So what is so special about this number 14?

The name 'David' in Hebrew is made up of three radicals - dalet-waw-dalet. Dalet was given the numerical value 4 and waw - 6. By adding them together, 4+6+4 you come to the grand total of 14. By arranging Jesus family tree as three blocks of 14, the very *pattern* declares that Jesus is David's greater Son, the Christ.

We find the same kind of device operating in John's Gospel.

## That which God has joined together

Let's take the beginning and end of John's Gospel, the prologue 1:1-17 and the epilogue- 21.

It has been long disputed whether the epilogue is original to John's Gospel. You can understand why. You might think that a more 'natural' and 'obvious' climactic ending would have been 20:30-31, 'Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' What a great punchy, evangelistic ending to the Gospel which would have been a gift to Billy Graham!

What is more, some might think that a Gospel which begins with the portrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ in such lofty terms as being 'the Logos', who was 'with God' and 'was God' from all eternity, enjoying the most intimate of relationships with the Father as the 'the one and only' (1:18), should then wind up with an account of a fishing trip and the rehabilitation of Peter as something of an anti-climax. Furthermore, to end with the reflection that there wouldn't be enough libraries in the world to accommodate all the books that would need to be written in order to capture everything Jesus said and done, may seem rather lame (21:25). Hence the conclusion that Chapter 21 was tacked on to the original Gospel written by the beloved disciple.

But what *if* John was doing at the end of his Gospel, what Matthew was doing at the beginning of his- namely, highlighting the identity and significance of Jesus in some other more subtle way? This, as they say, would then be a game changer.

This is where the device of gematria comes in.<sup>2</sup>

The prologue contains 496 syllables and the epilogue 496 words in Greek. This has led Professor Richard Bauckham to conclude that this is more than a coincidence. Only too true, because 496 is the numerical value for 'only begotten' (*μονογενής*) which forms the climax of the prologue in v18, 'No one has seen the father but the 'only begotten' (*μονογενής*) being in the bosom o the Father

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<sup>2</sup> THE 153 FISH AND THE UNITY OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL Richard Bauckham *Neotestamentica* Vol. 36, No. 1/2, Word, Sacrament, and Community: Festschrift for Professor J N Suggit (2002), pp. 77-88

has made him known.’ This is equivalent to Matthew’s genealogy and the number 14 which presents in code form (gematria) that Jesus is the ‘Christ’ in the line of David. By the same means John is underscoring the uniqueness and supremacy of the Son as the *μονογενής*. Of course this also increases the likelihood that the epilogue was written by the same person who wrote the rest of the Gospel.

### **A fishy story**

For centuries, scholars and theologians have pondered the significance, if any, of the large number of fish caught and, more to the point, the *precise number* specified in Chapter 21:11, ‘So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.’

Why not just say ‘a large number of fish were caught’, why be so specific? Some argue that this may be no more than an attempt by John to substantiate his credentials as an eyewitness, in a way which is similar to 19:34-35, ‘One of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. 35 The man *who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true*. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.’ After all, *someone* had to count the fish (they weren’t weighed as they might be today) and perhaps John was the one who had drawn the short straw for this smelly task? Is that all there is to it, a way of saying, ‘I know this happened- I was there!’?

That certainly may be *part* of the significance of the number but not the whole story.

### **Some fishy interpretations**

You will not be surprised to hear that down the centuries there have been all sorts of interpretations put forward to explain the meaning of the number of the great catch of fish.

Let me mention four of them.

1. The catch of fish tells us of the salvation of humanity. However, humanity cannot be saved without keeping the 10 commandments, according to this view. But, on account of the fall, we cannot even keep the commandments without the help of grace and the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the number 7 signifies holiness, since God blessed the 7<sup>th</sup> day and made it holy (Gen 2:3). 10 plus 7 equals 17, and if all the numbers from 1 to 17 are added together (1+2+3...+17), they equal 153 (the 17<sup>th</sup> triangular number). Hence, the 153 fish signify that all the elect are to be saved by the gift of grace (7) and the following of the commandments (10). This was St Augustine's proposal in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>
2. We then move on to St Cyril who was born in Thessalonica in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. He pointed out that 153 consists of 100 (the great number of gentiles to be saved), plus 50 (the smaller number of Jews to be saved), plus 3 (the Trinity who saves all). Others follow St. Cyril, but modify this as follows: 100 (the multitude of married lay faithful in the Church), plus 50 (the many faithful who commit themselves later in life to continence either living as widows or living with their spouse in a brother-sister relationship), plus 3 (the precious few who commit their whole lives to celibacy as virgins) equals 153 (the whole Church taken together as a single body). This makes me want to exclaim, 'If you believe that you will believe anything!' But all of this was taken quite seriously.
3. St Jerome in the 4<sup>th</sup> century took hold of the common belief at the time there were only 153 species of fish in the whole world. Hence, the disciples caught 153 fish, signifying that people of every class and time would be saved as the Gospel is proclaimed, as people 'fished for men.'
4. Perhaps the most amusing explanation is that fishermen have always been prone to exaggeration, stretching their arms to illustrate the size of their catch. But John wanted us to know that this was no exaggeration; he understood that the more details he could provide, the more credible his story would be. Yes, this was a *big* catch!

I could give you plenty of more examples, some of which are, to put it mildly, very creative (an English understatement for 'OFF THE WALL'). Having thought about the four I have just

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<sup>3</sup> St Augustine, *Commentary on John*, 72.8

mentioned you might be inclined to side with the conclusion drawn by Professor Raymond Brown in his commentary on John who simply raises the white flag, 'One cannot deny that some of these interpretations (they are not mutually exclusive) are possible, but they all encounter the same objection: we have no evidence that any such complicated understating of 153 would have been intelligible to John's readers.'<sup>4</sup>

However, I am not so sure that we need to throw up our hands in surrender just yet. The question is: How do we sift through the competing interpretations in order to engage in a *literate* reading of the passage, that is, a reading which is true to the original intentions of both the divine and human authors and would have made sense to John's target audience?

### 3 Principles for avoiding crazy readings<sup>5</sup>

1. The claim made must *fit* the data of the *text*. This might sound like stating the blindingly obvious, but it is amazing how often people claim that a text says something when, looking at it more closely, it says nothing of the sort (No, the Trinity or Virgins are *not* to be found in John 21!). Our task is to derive the meaning *from* the text (*exegesis*) not reading our own meaning *into* the text (*eisegesis*).
2. The reading must have been a possible meaning for the *author* of the text and its *first readers*. This is the principle that Raymond Brown is assuming—but it depends on understanding Scripture as both 'God-breathed' and the product of human authorship at the same time. The Bible is a human (though infallible Book) as well as divine (which is why it is infallible) and so we must go with the way the original writers and readers would have understood it, interpreting it in line with the literary conventions of the day, some of which may seem strange to us.

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI* (Anchor Bible Commentaries, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> See, Dr Ian Paul, <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/do-the-153-fish-in-john-21-count-for-anything/>

3. Any 'deep' meaning must cohere with the 'surface' meaning of the text. This is a principle which is linked with the way we believe God has chosen to communicate to us. It certainly is the case that Jesus taught in parables as a strategy to challenge his listeners to think again about God and his kingdom, with them acting as a kind of filter to sort out those who meant business with God and the superficial hangers on: Mtt.13:10-12, 'The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance.' Notice there will be those who 'have', who have 'got it', and so will be given more. The Christian conviction is that God does *want* to communicate with us and *has done so* clearly. The Bible is not a mystery book requiring a special code to crack it; it is God speaking to us in ways we can understand (illuminated by the Holy Spirit of course). This is what is referred to as the *perspicuity of Scripture*. Or, to use the lovely phrase of John Calvin, God stoops down 'to lisp to us', as we might speak to a toddler or little child. He accommodates himself to our humanness which means he will use the conventionally accepted means of writing of the time to connect with us. God wants to communicate and make things clear, not play tricks on us and tease us with esoteric codes and hidden meanings.

With those three principles in mind what are we to make of the 153 fish?

Thinking of the suggestions of Augustine, Cyril and Jerome, we have to ask is there any evidence that for *John and his readers*, 153 was a symbolic number and in some way represented all the people in the world?

It seems there is.

### **Reading the text without filleting it**

As someone has said, 'Here we are sharply reminded that, whilst Scripture is 'close' to us, in that we hear God speaking to us through it by his Spirit, as it gives testimony to the Son, at

another level to read the Bible is to go on a cross-cultural journey, since we think of numbers in quite a different way from first-century people.’<sup>6</sup>

We have already seen that numbers were significant when it came to gematria.

Here’s the thing: 153 is the numerical value of the Hebrew for ‘sons of God’ (בני האלהים,) - *bene ha-'elohim*. That should ring bells with us straight away with our minds being taken to the beginning of John’s Gospel and God’s great purpose for sending his one and only Son into the world; 1:11-13, ‘He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become *children of God*—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.’ the same theme appears later in 11:52 within the context of Caiaphas’s ‘prophecy’, ‘Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered *children of God*, to bring them together and make them one.’

This means that what we have here in this miraculous catch is not only the miracle that it is a *big* number, but it is *this* number. In other words, the evangelistic intention of God set out in the prologue is reinforced in the epilogue by way of gematria. As the Gospel is proclaimed, God will bring in all his children into his kingdom- those who believe on Christ. After all, what is the purple passage of John but 3:16, ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*’?

However, the significance that this *is* a large number shouldn’t be overlooked.

There are not very many large numbers mentioned in the New Testament: this is one; Acts 27.37 is another where Luke mentions that there are 276 people who are saved from the shipwreck;

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Paul, op cit.

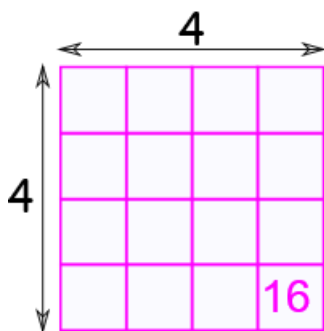


and the number of beast in Rev 13.18 is 666. What is striking is that all three of these are 'triangular' numbers.

Let me say a little more about triangular numbers.

We are familiar with square numbers.

For example,  $4 \times 4 = 16$



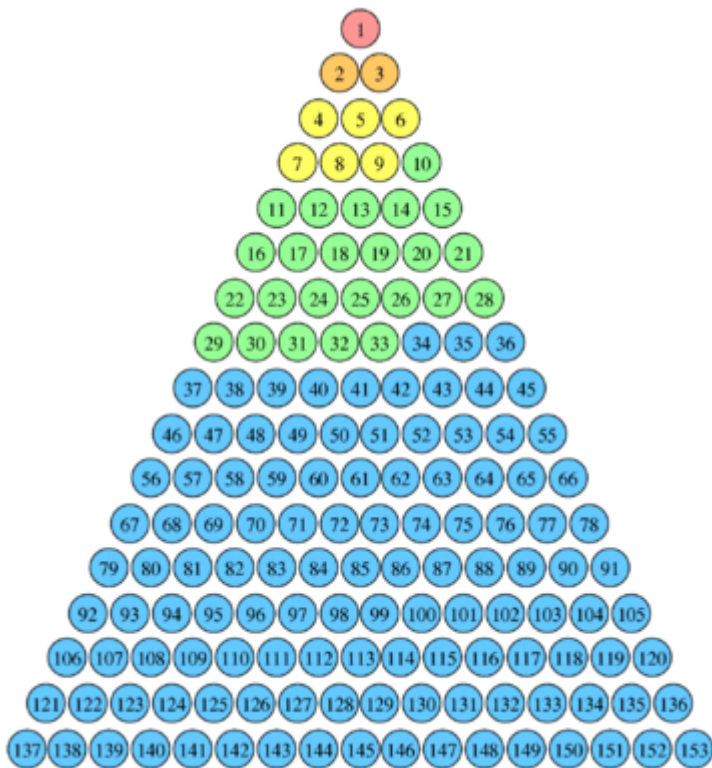
We easily recognise a square number.

The ancient world had another sophisticated method of counting- triangular numbers- the sum of successive integers:



Triangular numbers were more important in a world where you primarily count using physical objects, rather than in our world where numbers are more like abstract concepts. In fact, the word in the New Testament for 'to calculate' (*psephizo*) derives from the word for 'pebble' (*psephos*). Pebbles would have been used as counters.

As Augustine rightly noted 153 is the triangle of 17 ( $1+2+3+4+\dots+17=153$ ), we might then ask, what is the significance of the number 17?



This is where we turn to another passage in the Bible which helps shed some light on the subject. In Acts 2:9-11 Luke provides a list of the regions whose residents were in Jerusalem at Pentecost, ‘Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’”

Taking ‘the Jews and proselytes’ as two groups, Ben Witherington<sup>7</sup> points out that we come to the number ‘17’. Given that in Jewish thought ‘10’ is the number of perfect order and ‘7’ the number of completion/perfection, maybe Luke is making the claim that the Gospel message at

<sup>7</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles -A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Eerdmanns, 2001), pp 136-137

the very *beginning* went out to people from all over the known world (which Jesus said must be so- 1:8).

Luke *is* certainly interested in numbers. Martin Menken has shown that in Peter's Pentecost sermon it is divided into two halves of 444 syllables each, the total 888 being the gematria value of Jesus name in Greek.<sup>8</sup> So may it be the 'all nations' connection is also here in John 21 and the account of the great catch of fish. The '10' and the '7' forming the triangular number 17 which makes 153- the complete and perfect number of those to be saved- those 'caught' by the Gospel.

So Augustine's conclusion may have been right even if it was for the wrong reasons. The Gospel call is to go out to all nations. Earlier Jesus had said that as the good shepherd he came to lay down his life for his sheep, some of which are not of the Jewish sheep fold (Jn. 10:16). They too will hear his voice and there will be one flock under one shepherd. There is both a *universality* about the Gospel, it is to go out to *all people*, and a *particularity* too, it is for *his sheep*, those the Father has given to him, who will hear his voice and respond, 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me [this is the election which Augustine spoke of] is greater than I, no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (Jn. 10:27-30).

Being biblically literate also means reading a passage not only in terms of its immediate context (literary context) but in the light of the Bible as a whole (canonical context). So let us ask whether there is any other part of the Bible which might lie behind John's account which backs up the interpretation that this is a symbol of reaching out to the nations of the world?

There is at least one- **Ezekiel 47: 1-12**

'The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was

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<sup>8</sup> M. J. J. Menken, *Numerical Literary Techniques in John: The Fourth Evangelist's Use of Numbers of Words and Syllables* (NovT Supplement, 1985).

coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. 2 He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side..... (v6) Then he led me back to the bank of the river. 7 When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. 8 He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. 9 Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. *There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.* 10 Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea.’

This links in with Jerome’s reflection that through the Gospel all sorts of people from every class will be saved, again giving us an example where someone was right in understanding the significance of a passage but for the wrong reasons.

In Ezekiel 47, we see baptismal waters flowing from the overturned Bronze Sea of the Temple, flowing out to the boundaries of the Land. Remember how Jesus claimed to be the source of such living waters in Jn. 7:37f, ‘On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! 38 Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’ 39 (When he said “living water,” he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. But the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet entered into his glory.)’

In Ezekiel 47:9, we are told that “very many fish” will live in the (formerly) Dead Sea as a result of these living waters. In verse 10 we read, “And it will come about that fishermen will stand beside it; from En-Gedi to En-Eglaim there will be a place for spreading of nets. Their fish will be according to their kinds, like the fish of the Great [Mediterranean] Sea, very many.” The Dead Sea is the boundary of the new land after the exile, and a place of contact with Gentiles. This means that the fishes are the Gentile nations. The fact that the sea is formerly dead and now is brought to life may indicate the hoped for influence of Restoration Israel over the nations before Christ, pointing to the greater influence of the Kingdom after Pentecost.

Furthermore we have another example of gematria.

If we subtract the “En” from En-Gedi and En-Eglaim, since “en” means “spring,” then the following emerges:

Gedi = 17 (10= י; 4= ד; 3= ג)

Eglaim = 153 (40= מ; 10= י; 30= ל; 3= ג; 70= ו)

This seems too close to the mark to be a coincidence. Once again, we have the number 17 (Gedi, mentioned first) and its relative 153 (Eglaim, mentioned second) connecting to the evangelization of the gentiles, symbolized by fishing.

Of course the story of the fishing expedition in John should trigger in our minds another time involving Peter and the others which had a similar result- Luke 5:1-11. You will remember the story: after a disastrous night of failing to catch anything Jesus told them to cast their nets and in came a bumper harvest of fish, followed by Jesus statement, ‘From now on you will *fish for people*’ – evangelism. And I am sure that earlier episode would have been immediately brought to mind amongst the disciples too.

### **Bringing in together**

Let me mention three things:

1. These passages, while on the one hand being familiar to us, are also strange. We are not used to reading literature which uses devices like gematria. But once we recognise how earlier authors and readers would have operated, it helps us to appreciate the meaning of the text more fully. So, keep on coming along to the Biblical literacy classes!!!!
2. There is a very good case to be made that the number 153 is both real and symbolic. I do believe that under the amazing sovereignty of God, 153 fish *were* actually caught and counted that day. God in his omnipotence orchestrated it to be this way in order to convey the truth made elsewhere explicitly as in Mtt. 28:19, and symbolically as in Ezekiel 47, that the Gospel is for the entire world.

3. Similarly with the number 17 which is connected to Pentecost, and when this event is linked to Luke 5, not only is the commission to make disciples of all nations underscored- this is what we are to do, it also strengthens our confidence that the exact number of God's people will be drawn in, such that 'not one will be missing'. It was this doctrine of 'election' which enabled Paul to persevere in Corinth, 'One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision, 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, *because I have many people in this city.*' (Acts 18:9-10) The result was that he kept on 'fishing' for people by proclaiming the Gospel.

### Points for Home

- This episode of the catch of 153 fish is of a piece with one of the main themes of John's Gospel as captured by the words of Jesus, 'As for me, if I am lifted up from the earth, *I will draw all people to myself.*' (Jn. 12:32). World mission is part of the heartbeat of God. Commit yourself afresh to the Great Commission by resolving to pray and support some overseas mission endeavour. Ask the Lord whether he is calling you to be part of His global vision.
- The disciples are fishing in home waters – the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus' commissions them to begin proclaiming the Gospel first in *Jerusalem* (Acts 1:8). Who can you pray for and witness to this week nearer home? Cast the net wide!
- We have seen the value of a literate reading of the Scriptures. Commit yourself this week to going deeper into God's Word, with the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit to mine all the treasures it contains.

